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PP RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHTI #0174/01 0671332
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071332Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6787
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000174

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NATO](#) [AL](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTORAL REFORMS FOR NATO LEAD TO A "THIRD POLE"
IN ALBANIAN POLITICS

REF: A. TIRANA 161
[B](#). TIRANA 117
[C](#). 07 TIRANA 659
[D](#). 06 TIRANA 809

Classified By: DCM Stephen A. Cristina, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Albanian political spectrum changed abruptly when Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) Chairman Ilir Meta declared that his party would no longer participate in the left-wing coalition. Rather, Meta registered a new, competing coalition, to which he hopes to attract the remaining small parties of the left, and possibly some from the governing coalition as well. Tensions between Meta and Socialist Party (SP) Chairman Edi Rama had been building, with reports that Rama was refusing to meet Meta's power-sharing demands half-way. The fast pace of electoral reform, spurred by Albania's NATO ambitions and the new era of cooperation between Rama and Prime Minister Berisha (Ref B), expedited the split. If the opposition remains divided, it would give Berisha's Democratic Party (DP) a strong advantage in 2009 elections, as did the rift between opposition parties in 2005. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Since the 2005 elections, LSI Chairman Meta has gone to great pains to prove his loyalty to the five-party opposition coalition. Meta's withdrawal from partnership with the SP in those elections is widely credited with causing the failure of the left and the return of the DP-led coalition to power. According to contacts, Meta met Rama at his Tirana mayoral office and presented specific demands, such as a guarantee for an increase in LSI MPs from five to 15 in 2009 elections. It is widely believed he sought an understanding on the office of prime minister, as well. The requests were reportedly all refused.

[1](#)3. (C) Immediately upon leaving the meeting at the mayoral office, an infuriated Meta began publicly attacking Rama's integrity and his legitimacy as a member of the Socialist Party or of the left. He then smoothly praised the values of genuine socialism and the contribution of the Socialist Party and its governments. The performance was vintage Meta, the Meta of the 1990 student movement, the Meta who led the Youth Socialist Party Forum (FRESH), the twice former Prime Minister -- with his indisputable contribution to the Socialist Party and multiple Albanian governments. (It also had distant overtones of the Ilir Meta who came close to physically assaulting Parliament Speaker Topalli on the floor of the Parliament in 2006 (Ref D).) Then Meta took the practical step of registering in the courts a new political movement called "Coalition: The Left for Integration."

[1](#)4. (C) With the onset of serious electoral reform, tension has been brewing between Albania's two large parties (SP and DP) on one side and its multiple small parties on the other. Earlier this year, the small parliamentary parties of both the governing and opposition coalitions joined in an unofficial one-issue coalition to resist any reform of the

electoral system that would strengthen the larger parties at the expense of their smaller brethren. Meta's new coalition offers these parties an alternative. Shortly after its formation, sources close to former SP Chair Fatos Nano and Meta confirmed the two had reached a deal during a quiet lunch. Some of the six ousted Nano SP MPs who had voted for President Topi (Ref C) have already conveyed public support for Meta's endeavor. (COMMENT: "Deals" with Nano are frequently rumored and almost as frequently fail to materialize. In this case, however, it is interesting to note that one of LSI's most outspoken Nano critics has, since the formation of the new "Coalition," refrained from criticizing the former SP chair, even when baited to do so on a television talk show. END COMMENT.) Other SP MPs, known in political circles as "the unspoken," are considered fluid enough in their loyalties to move to the new coalition. Social Democracy Party's (PDS) Paskal Milo remains Meta's loyal ally. Some small parties of the ruling coalition could also decide to join the new umbrella.

15. (SBU) Meta is really the only small party Albanian parliamentarian elected directly and with a relatively strong popular identity. While neither LSI nor the new "Coalition: The Left for Integration" can yet offer an equal prospect of future power as SP and DP, if the new coalition attracts some additional supporters, it stands to become a solid third pole and king-maker. It is unclear if there is sufficient discontent among the two major coalitions that we will see smaller partners peeling off, even with a seemingly inexorable push by SP and DP to move forward with electoral reform that is highly likely to disenfranchise at least a few of the smaller partners. SP and DP will, however, try to lure their closest small allies, at least enough of them to secure sufficient parliamentary votes for constitutional and

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electoral changes. (Constitutional changes require a two-thirds parliamentary vote, or 94 favorable votes.)

16. (C) Asked if the new coalition was intended for the 2009 elections, a subdued Chairman of LSI's Executive Committee said "it remains to be seen." Echoing Meta's public remarks, Edmond Haxhinasto said LSI was unwilling to be part of a "dictatorial" opposition. If this new "third pole" remains, it is much more harmful to SP and Edi Rama than to PM Berisha and DP. Berisha's coalition partners are generally more disciplined and less likely to defect, at least as long as government positions and lucre are within reach. Rama cannot make it alone. LSI condemned the socialists to opposition once; Meta's new umbrella can get enough votes to leave the SP out once more. As the 2009 elections approach, Rama will have to cope with Meta. For now, he has adopted an open, unifying and receptive public stand, even, as he said, for "his friend Ilir Meta." Rama's task will be to continue as the "uniting force" of the opposition, while preventing Berisha and Nano from pulling Meta into their corners. His greatest challenge will be how to accommodate Meta's declared interest in the Prime Minister's post.

17. (SBU) Pundits and opinion makers across the political spectrum have dismissed the demands of the small parties in the electoral reform debate, instead showing considerable support for "getting the job done." In contrast, the SP-LSI split, however, has been portrayed -- approvingly -- as an "honest confrontation" on issues, rather than a battle of personalities.

WITHERS